

Achsah & Caleb

Sermon on Judges 1: 11-15

We have the book of Judges again today. A book that shows what happens when people do not listen to God but mostly to themselves.

The book of Judges presents an account of twelve military heroes who delivered Israel from its oppressors. Not all of these judges were heroes in every sense. Yet they had been raised up to carry out God's will in Israel and, for the most part, the judges were willing to follow God's will. The judges' interest in doing God's will was significant because the Israelites were mostly interested in doing their own will. "All the people did what was right in their own eyes, because there was no king in Israel," we read further on in chapter 17.

The book of Judges drives home the truth that people who lose their spiritual commitment wander into idolatry and anarchy. It is a disturbing book to read, because of its account of massive civil wars, violence, abuse of women, and power-grabbing leaders. It depicts the worst and weakest side of humanity.

The people of Israel, as Izzy told us so vividly in his sermon three weeks ago, had been freed from slavery in Egypt. The time of Moses was gone, the time of Joshua was gone. They had no direction... The great stories were forgotten. The God of Abraham and Isaac seemed to have lost his power...

In all this mess we come across Achsah and Caleb.

We discovered Achsah's story on a Thursday evening in the Women's Bible Study. None of us present had ever heard of her. A challenge to me, as you can easily imagine. I needed to do research on Achsah. Find out who she was, and what she did.

The first impression is: although Achsah had to abide by the customary way of being married off as a daughter, she enjoyed an unusual relationship with her father, Caleb.

In the flow of their story he asks her a question that stands out for ever: "**What** do you wish? Or: "What do **you** wish?"

But let's go right to the beginning of the book of Judges, and also to Achsah's story.

We discover Achsah overnight going from being the daughter of a celebrated, charismatic, highly respected clan leader named Caleb to being the wife of a celebrated, charismatic, highly respected, up-and-coming judge in Israel named Othniel.

As the only daughter among four brothers, you can bet that Achsah was "the apple of her daddy's eye." What she'd learned in her father's house about pleasing men she would carry into her husband's house. From all indications, Caleb was probably

a good father. The writer of the book of Numbers describes him as visionary and positive in his outlook. His special affection for his only daughter is evident most when he tries to find a suitable husband for her.

The idea of my father organising a search to find a husband for me makes me shake my head and laugh. I was born in the sixties of the last century in a country of the western world. I was raised free and equal, and all options of education were open to me...

But in the ancient world inhabited by Caleb and Achsah a father could show no greater love and care for his daughter than to arrange a marriage for her that sealed alliances, expended territories, and secured the family's future. Achsah married the man her father chose for her. She had no say and no choice. But she refused the role of passive object, as we will see...

A side of Achsah perhaps secretly hoped that Caleb would change his mind about marrying her off to Othniel. How could he do this to her? Why was he sending her away? Deep down Achsah maybe felt let down by her father? Why won't he rush to keep and protect her?

Because he can't, is the answer. Caleb is a product of his culture. And still we see in the story a positive father-daughter relationship.

Despite the tragic elements, the story of Caleb and Achsah manages to rise above the tragedy. Achsah was in many ways very much like her father, – her enthusiasm, her quick thinking, her ability to plan and to set a plan in motion, her gift of persuasion. And she made all these gifts work for her purposes.

There are these moments in life when you have to decide what to do with the life you have. ...when you have to choose, decide, risk, dare... Who will you be? Would Achsah remain a weak woman, or would she draw on the best life has to offer, to begin the journey of becoming strong in her broken world?

Achsah was married to Othniel, a warrior judge in Israel, and settled in his household. She decided to make her way back to her father's house for a visit. She knew more about what she needed now that she was married to Othniel, and she planned to approach Caleb. On her way to her father's compound she must have gone through the words she would say over and over again.

Since she and Othniel were getting land in the dry region of the Negev, she had to ask for water.

Achsah dismounted her donkey. After hearing her father's greeting, she said: "Grant me a blessing, Father. You have given me the Negev, now give me also a spring of water."

And he gave her two.

Two springs of water to a woman who knows the region well and called the various parts by their names.

“You have given me the Negev...”

Achsah needed land which could be cultivated. And for that she needed water. Having cultivable land as part of her dowry brought along for her a safe space in her husband’s household.

Achsah’s brave action could enter the tradition of prayers in the Bible as “Achsah’s Prayer”. She was not only asking her father for good land for herself.

She was speaking to God, the creator of heaven and earth, on behalf of all women challenging the status quo.

Hers was a prayer to God for answers to the problems plaguing the poor, the marginalized, the downtrodden, and the invisible who live in societies where the laws and customs were against them.

Whereas for many people the idea of a blessed life may often be understood as simply being able to survive whatever hardships life hurls at you, Achsah’s wish for her life was different: Her prayer to God might have been “God, show me how I can thrive in this world. It is not enough to survive as a woman in the world. Bless me, so I can teach those coming after me, how to live a blessed life, too!”

To his credit Caleb granted his daughter her request without hesitation. He gave her land that would assure her comfort, and her children’s stability and comfort beyond her own lifetime.

The story of Achsah teaches us that these gifts could only be given and achieved when a daughter dismounted from her donkey, and was ready to claim what is hers, and when a father - however bound to the patriarchal world – listened to his daughter.

Caleb’s daughter was the reward to a mighty warrior. There was nothing in those days that she could do against this. She was the possession of her father, and he dealt with her as he pleased.

Achsah, though, came face to face with her father.

Her husband received land along with his bride, but Achsah knew that they also need a source of water to keep the land fruitful, to make things grow... to make a living there in the desert.

Achsah was given a desert, and she asks for water!

What a remarkable idea from a remarkable woman!

She is smart and clever enough to ask for a favour, a gift, a blessing. And she gets what she wants.

Achsah had hidden power with which she forever guaranteed the option of farming for her and her family. She did not question the tradition nor the authority of her father, but she improved her life and opened the future for herself and others.

The book of Judges contains a greater number of interesting women characters than many other biblical books.

The first woman in Judges 1 is Achsah. She was both, a passive object, a prize offered by her father for a military victory, and she was an active subject, a bold petitioner who sought to secure her own well-being and the well-being of her family.

Her status as a daughter set the stage for all the other daughters of Judges whose fates would be decided by their fathers and husbands.

Achsah's story began carefully telling about women's vulnerability, which would reach painful highpoints in other unfortunate women's fates... Jephtach's daughter, Samson's bride and many more who did not survive.

And yet, Achsah's situation suggests that even in a patriarchal world, women can sometimes have power, especially – or actually only - when they are treated with esteem by men in their family.

Achsah's brief story raises all sorts of unresolved issues about power, control, possession, identity, and the social health of the Israelite nation.

The picture of Achsah dismounting from her donkey in boldness and self-assurance to ask her father for what she needed, and her father granting her request contrasts brutally with other texts in Judges where women were abused, oppressed, tortured and killed.

Somewhere between the beginning and the end of Judges, things must have gone terribly wrong in the history of Israel...

However, Achsah's 3000 year-old story tells us of a woman who even in the darkest times of her people's history, remained an advocate of life who cared for the future.

This is where we can identify with her – women and men: pluck up our courage, claim what is right and necessary, and grant stability for the lives we are responsible for.

May we all have the courage to be as smart, bold and persistent as Achsah of the book of Judges. May we claim what we know must be ours. May we speak up for the truth, give voice to those with no voice, and be advocates of justice and peace. Achsah stands for the desire for life and human dignity.

For the glory of God, we give thanks for Achsah. Amen.